DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 450 343 CS 014 264

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TITLE A Picture (Book) Is Worth a Thousand Words.
PUB DATE 2000-11-00
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (90th, Milwaukee, WI, November 16-21, 2000).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Instructional Effectiveness; Interdisciplinary Approach; *Language Arts; *Literacy; *Middle School Students; Middle Schools; *Picture Books; Teacher Role
IDENTIFIERS Concept Acquisition

ABSTRACT

This paper elaborates on using picture books in the classroom--not just for young students' recreational reading, but also as a creative method for introducing complex concepts to the middle school adolescent. The paper contends that the language arts classroom needs to become a secure community where students are "pulled into" literacy learning situations because the topics are interesting to them. It states that one way to introduce literary elements and writing concepts to middle school students is through the use of picture books-- whose stories simplify various language arts themes and concepts so students can apply and extend themes, literary elements, and writing concepts to grade level tasks. It also finds that another value of picture books for the older reader and writer is the opportunity they present for examining form and structure. The paper illustrates how one teacher uses picture books in every unit of study throughout her school year. It concludes that regardless of age and grade level, students, even older ones, need the careful step-by-step learning experiences that picture book lessons can provide. It stresses that picture books have an important place, enhancing math concepts, history lessons, science experiments, human relations development, and, of course, the language arts curriculum. Contains 5 figures and 10 references. (NKA)

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A Picture (Book) is Worth a Thousand Words

Margaret Jan Graham

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A Picture (Book) is Worth a Thousand Words

As thirty eleven and twelve year-olds bounced into the classroom, the teacher took a deep breath. They wearily eyed the overhead projector screen for the day's lesson. The warm-up journal topic stated, "Write about an object, place, or person from one of your earliest memories." Although a few students quickly began writing, most groaned phrases such as, "I can't think of anything to write." Some begrudgingly picked up pencils but muttered, "How long does this have to be?" The teacher just smiled.

After the bell rang and the class quieted down, she said, "Before you begin writing, let's read a book together." She opened a brightly-covered picture book and began to read. As Mem Fox's *Wilfred Gordon McDonald Partridge* unfolded, students shuffled to get closer in order to see the illustrations. The only sound heard in the classroom was the teacher reading. Heads nodded frequently in agreement. Mem Fox's story of how everyday objects can trigger very personal and special remembrances for an older woman who has lost her memory reminded students about their cherished memories.

After the teacher finished, she reread the writing topic for the day. "Now," she said, "think of an object, person, or place from your earliest memory. Write to describe your memory." The students began again, and most seemed willing to complete the journal that day. As the students interacted with the story, personal

meaning was given to everyday objects and experiences in their lives, facilitating the writing process.

Because the complexity of the middle school adolescent often brings challenges to the middle school teacher, finding creative methods to introduce complex concepts is a must. One of the most fascinating and complex transitions in the life span, adolescence often manifests itself in profound biological, physical, and psychological changes which baffle adults who live and work with young people. Contrary to popular belief, teenagers' relationships with parents and other adults are far less stormy than has been generally thought. In fact, according to *Great Transitions,* the 1996 report of the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, parents, teachers, and other adults continue to influence children during adolescence, molding their sense of self as they grow into adulthood. However, peers also wield an important influence, contributing to an adolescent's self-esteem, identity, and achievement (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1996). As the middle school student moves from early to middle adolescence, he becomes egocentric. Teachers can use this notion of self as the center of the universe to their advantage.

Language arts teachers have a unique place in the development of students. Through language arts, students construct themselves over and over again. Reading and writing activities allow students to think and rethink their identities in

relationship to the world around them. Because adolescents learn everything within a social context, if lessons are not meaningful to them, they are apt to pay no attention. The language arts classroom needs to become a secure community where students are "pulled into" literacy learning situations because the topics are interesting to them.

The dilemma for middle school language arts teachers lies in how to introduce students to the abstract elements of literature and form contained in the curriculum so that young adolescents are able to understand them. Early adolescents tend to think in single-issue, concrete terms. Making the shift from concrete to abstract thinking, though possible, is not part of the typical young adolescent cognitive process. In addition, evidence indicates that adolescence is a crucial period in the development of critical thinking (Feldman and Elliott, 1990).

One way to introduce literary elements and writing concepts to middle school students is through the use of picture books. Using picture books, whose stories simplify various language arts themes and concepts, students apply and extend themes, literary elements, and writing concepts to grade level tasks. Hardly too juvenile for use in secondary classrooms, picture books help the reader build greater awareness of language and offer opportunities to explore and learn the conventions.

Regardless of age and grade level, students all need careful, step-by-step learning experiences when comprehending a new concept (Hall, 1994). As with younger children, the place to begin is enjoyment. Picture books, however, go beyond personal pleasure and aesthetic satisfaction. By first presenting literary elements and writing concepts using the simpler vehicles of picture books, teachers can expect students to be prepared when they encounter the same literary elements and concepts in more challenging literature, and students are more prepared to recognize and understand these elements and concepts. Students can only move beyond the literal interpretation of a piece of literature and to its symbolic level through progressive practice in exploring how literary devices function. Picture books exhibit simple, clearly illustrated examples of these devices, easily recognized and understood (Hall, 1990).

Another value of picture books for the older reader and writer is the opportunity they present for examining form and structure. Analyzing story patterns and the way picture books are put together may help readers recognize patterns that are useful in interpreting longer texts. Student writers may discover ways of organizing information or of presenting imaginative ideas that will transfer to their own writing (Benedict and Carlisle, 1992).

Because picture books utilize both pictures and print, the possibilities for their use is expanded and intensified. Therefore, good picture books are dual

works of art, worthy of study and use in the secondary language arts classroom. They both entertain and teach, offering value to students of all ages.

Picture books are used in every unit of study throughout my school year. The first unit, "What Happened on the Day You Were Born?" is a unit to promote self-reflection and group collaboration while learning about figurative language, sequencing, inference, point of view, and show-not-tell writing techniques.

The unit began with a read aloud of Debra Frasier's *On the Day You Were Born*. Frasier's poetic prose engagingly celebrated the coming of new life while gently probing the mysteries of the physical universe. Students explored the figurative phrases on every page of the eloquent picture book. The class voted on which figurative phrase spoke most clearly to them. Students discussed and illustrated various pages of the book as they interpreted them. They were then ready to research and were encouraged to ask parents and grandparents to tell them stories about their birth events. Even students whose family stories may be unconventional related to the activity. As a variety of individual stories emerged, from traditional families to adopted families to foster care situations, students were engaged and interested in the research. A valuable internet site allowed students to find out exactly what events were going on in the world on the day of their birth. The web site allowed students to conduct research in a non-threatening manner (www.dmarie.com/asp/history.asp). Their stories became personalized without

intrusion into family issues students were not willing to share. Students then composed personal newsletters about themselves which included their "Day You Were Born" stories using a word processing program in the computer lab (figures 1, 2). Further information about this unit, including activities, resources, and rubrics for assessment can be accessed through my school's home page (www.cobb.leon.k12.fl.us/staff/stwjan.html).

Most middle school students believe that their parents are weird in some way. They also think that they are the only ones who feel that way. Adolescents often think that no one understands their point of view. Audrey Wood's *Weird Parents* and Judy Blume's *The Pain and the Great One* opened the door for discussion about diversity and point of view. Students were then able to comprehend point of view during later reading of short stories and novels. Students wrote about their position in their families and how they felt about being in that position (figures 3, 4).

Picture books became excellent stimuli for writing projects. In addition to the above writing, students listened to Mem Fox's *Wilfred Gordon McDonald Partridge* before writing about their early memories of objects, places, and people in their lives. One of the good, pragmatic reasons for not packing picture books away after second grade is the fact that picture books are the some of the best models for writing that students could use (Culham, 1998). Even if students shift

their reading to longer chapter books, their writing does not expand in this exponential way. The texts students write are more likely to resemble the texts of picture books than longer books composed of extended chapters. Whatever their reading preferences, they will need the picture books for their writing (Benedict and Carlisle, 1992).

Using picture books in middle school language arts units allowed my students to move more efficiently to grade level reading and writing which accompanied each theme. Along with the appropriate grade level mastery of the language arts standards, an added benefit was that students more readily adapted and applied literature and writing skills learned after instruction began with picture books. Students' synthesis of literary devices began with a simplified, though high quality version, using children's literature. Evaluation of the effective writing found in picture books helped ease student understanding of how the writing process works, helping them to take ownership of the writing process for themselves. Students' dissection of good writing traits through picture books improved their writing assessment scores as well as their writing tasks in other areas.

Students even wrote to some of the picture book authors. They sent *On the Day You Were Born* author, Debra Frasier copies of newsletters and illustrations from the study of her book. They were thrilled when she responded quite

favorably to the way middle school students used her book to grow as readers and writers (figure 5). Response from a "real" author personalized the project further, making the learning a powerful, authentic experience for students.

As the school year progressed students continued to read and explore picture books with each language arts unit. Students' demonstration of their understanding of the reading process was observed. Evaluation of themes from short stories, nonfiction, and novels studied throughout the year gave students opportunities to practice newly understood literary knowledge. Growth in the writing process was observed informally in the willingness of students to produce, edit, and publish writing products, and formally in slowly rising writing assessment scores. Finally, using picture books allowed for more student creativity and individual exploration.

Regardless of age and grade level, students, even older ones, need the careful step-by-step learning experiences that picture book lessons can provide. Through the use of picture books, complicated concepts loose their esoteric nature for students, allowing for greater internalization of the language arts concepts needed to grow to the next level. Classroom curriculum now encompasses resources beyond the course textbooks. Picture books have an important place, enhancing math concepts, history lessons, art projects, science experiments, human

relations development, and, of course, the language arts curriculum. A picture book is truly worth a thousand words.

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Figure 1

Newsletter Activity

Cool Cub Chronicles
Personal Newsletter Requirements

You will be completing a personal newsletter using Microsoft 4.0 software in the computer lab. Although you will work with a partner at the computer, each student will complete his/her own newsletter. Partners will help each other proofread, edit, and format the newsletter. Your newsletter will be assessed using the requirements listed below.

10 • Title or Header: Think of a catchy title for your newsletter. You may include either your first or last name. You may use alliteration in the title to grab the reader's attention.

10 • Picture: You should include one picture in the newsletter. The picture may be one you bring from home to scan and copy into the newsletter or one you find during the internet activities to copy from the internet.

25 • "On the Day You Were Born Story": You will type the final draft of your personal story as an article in your newsletter. Make sure that you and your partner have each completed a "Peer Response Form" and that all editing has been done to your story.

15 • Advertisement: Write an ad about yourself. Use real newspaper ads as models. The ad should be "selling" something you could really do to help someone else.

15 Your Choice: Include at least one other article from the choices below.

• COLORS: Write about your experience completing the COLORS activities in our class. You may use your COLORS journal for this article.

• Favorite Something: Write an article about your favorite food, animal, sport, teacher, or any other favorite thing you can think about. You may use the internet or on-line encyclopedia to gather facts for this article.

• Person in Your Life: Write an article about your best friend or a special family member. Why is this person very special to you? Tell about your relationship with this person. How has the relationship changed you over time?

25 • Following Directions: You will be assessed on how well you are your partner follow all directions in the computer lab. Remember to follow computer lab rules at all times. Use COPS strategy to edit your articles.

100 TOTAL

Figure 2

Amber's World

Volume 1, Issue 2 November 9,199

AMBER'S DAY

On the day I was born, my family came from all over to see their new cousin, neise, granddaughter but most of all to see their new child. Because I looked like a jewel I was named Amber Leigh Stephens.

With dark brown hair, brown eyes, and 1/8 of Spanish blood I take after my dad. Excited family couldn't stop smiling even though I had colic. I wouldn't let anyone hold me except my mom, so everyone thought I was going to be a mama's girl. WRONG! Little daddy's girl loved to go to football and baseball games.

Meanwhile, championships were taking place. The L.A. Lakers beat Boston to win the NBA title. The Giants beat Denver 39-20 to win the Super bowl XXI. U.S.A'S yacht club "Star's and Stripes" defeated Australia's Kookaburra 3.

Going to the grocery stor with 20 bucks and having money left over was easy, back then. "I'm going tothe store to get milk, bread, a packet of stamps, and 5 gallons of gas." "O.K." With a total of $8.83, I wish the prices were still like that so we could all have more. That was the good times. I think that my family picked the best name out of thousands, and I will always be a jewel. That jewel born on July 21,1987.

That Special Someone

If'e hope to see views such as this on our family's ski trip.

There's one person in my family that I really like. That's my stepmom Julie. Why? Well, we both have a lot in common. We both like to shop, wish that everything had a lower price,we both like skiing, and other ice sports, and we both love each other. There are many other things but that's what we have most in common. Something that makes our relationship special is that she likes antiques and I like newer things. But that's what makes our relationship really special. Our relationship has grown stronger just when we do things together and that makes us happy.

CAN'T READ?
Amber Stephens will help you for $10 a hr. From a 3rd read level to a 8th grade level, all in a mth.! Call 884-9210.

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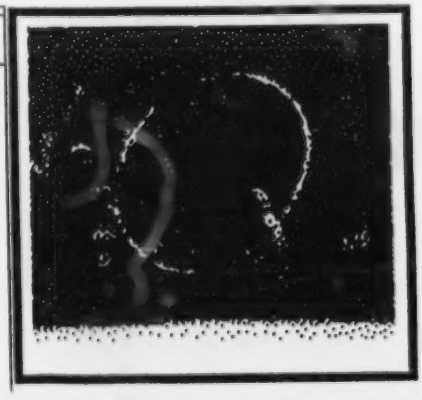

Figure 3

Family Position Writing Activity

Family Position Paragraph Language Arts

DIRECTIONS: After discussion in your class and a pre-writing activity that your teacher will explain, you must write a paragraph focusing on the advantages OR the disadvantages of being in the position you are within your family structure. Your paragraph must begin with a good topic sentence. Some sample topic sentences are as follows:

There are many advantages (or disadvantages) to being the "baby" in my family.

Being the oldest child in my family has several disadvantages (or advantages) that my siblings don't share.

I really love (or hate) being the "middle child" in my family for a variety of reasons.

After you write your topic sentence, you must write three reasons that explain what the advantages or disadvantages are, and with each reason, you must write another sentence that gives a specific example of exactly HOW it is an advantage or disadvantage. An example follows:

First, it is an advantage to be the youngest in the family because most of the time, I don't have to do many chores around the house. My parents automatically ask my big sister to vacuum, do the dishes, and the laundry, and my brother to clean the bathrooms, but somehow they forget to ask me to help.

When you have finished writing the three detail sentences and the three example sentences for each, you need to write a good concluding sentence to close the paragraph. An example follows:

All in all, being the "baby" in the family is fun since I really have very few chores, I usually get my way about what we watch on television, and my parents are so mellow now that I get to do things that my sister and brother had to be sixteen to do!

You must also use at least three transitional words to help your sentences flow smoothly. Circle the transition words as you use them.

DUE DATE _____

Your paper must be written neatly in blue or black ink or typed.

Figure 4

Student Samples of Family Position Paper

My Family Position

Being the oldest child in my family, I have several advantages that my siblings don't share. The first advantage to being the oldest child in the family is that I get special privileges. For example, I get to talk on the phone, stay up late, and go to the mall with my friends. The second advantage is that I get to tell my little brother and sisters what to do, since I'm the oldest. I remember when my mother let me babysit for my brother who was eight, and my baby sister who was only eight weeks old. I bossed them around. The third advantage is that I get a bigger allowance than my brother. I get at least five dollars more than he does every week! I like being the oldest because I have privileges, I get to boss people, and I get more money!

Sixth Grader

My Family Position

There are a lot of advantages to being the middle child. One reason is because I'm the only girl, or should I say I'm a mommy's girl. For example, when I do overtime work and then go to the store, she gets things for me, like clothes, shoes, and hair ties. My second reason is I never have to do many jobs because I'm a girl. For example, whenever we have to do an hour of work, all I have to do is dust or vacuum. My third and last reason is that I get money and clothes. For example, when I go to the mall, I get a lot of clothes. Well, all in all, I think I have it made as the middle child!

Sixth Grader

My Family Position

There are disadvantages to being the baby in the family. The first is, if anyone gets mad at me, they can beat me up. For example, if I say something they don't like they can pound me! Second, if I try to pull a trick, I usually get caught because my brothers and sisters have already tried it. Third, they get everything before me, as far as dates, going to the mall, and of course, driving. Fourth, my bedtime is about an hour earlier than theirs. Fifth, I'm the last to know things, like just the other day, my sisters went to get tickets to the ice show for the family and I never know that until after they had left. Sixth, I hate being called the baby. When I meet someone, they'll say, "So, you're the baby of the family." I hate that! So, you can see why I don't like being the baby.

Sixth Grader

Figure 5

Author Letter

Debra Frasier
August 1998 through June 1999
2245 Sea Turtle Lane
Vero Beach, FL 32960
(561) 231-8184 Fax: (561) 231-5818
email: debfra@aol.com

Mrs. Jan Graham
Cobb Middle School
915 Hillcrest Avenue
Tallahassee, FL 32308

April 13, 1999

Dear Jan,

What a wonderful surprise I received from you! And can you believe it: Your fat envelope arrived ON THE DAY I WAS BORN! Yes! My birthday, April 3! Can you imagine a finer gift on such a day?

Your work with **On the Day You Were Born** is astonishing. I have some idea as to the kind of energy and focus developing a project like this can take, and my hat goes off to you. To find my own book so entwined with your work was simply inspirational. The students are lucky to have you—and they have done such a fine job with their projects.

I am living in Florida this year, returning with my family for a year beside the ocean. My husband has a leave of absence from his teaching, and I am working hard on a new book that I cannot wait for you to see. It is called: **Miss Alaineus, A Vocabulary Disaster**. It is funny, yet truly about language and creative process, and someone like you will make it even more than it is, I am sure. We return to Minneapolis this summer, so please keep the address you used in your letter, and be sure and keep me informed of your activities. With your permission, I will add a brief recounting of your project to my tenth anniversary celebration I am making for **On the Day You Were Born** in the year 2001. Please let me know if that would be OK with you!

Enclosed, please find one copy of **On the Day You Were Born** for your library. I am so pleased to have found my way into your classroom.

Sincerely,

Debra Frasier

PS. I went to college at Florida State and sometimes I miss the azaleas with a longing for brilliant pink and draping moss that I can almost taste...Watch them for me.